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Brexit: how intra-party unity helps voters understand and feel certain about party policy positions

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Do voters update their perceptions of party positions? How

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Jung and Zeynep Somer-Topcu argue that perceptual updating and perceptual certainty depend on how divided or unified political parties are in their policy positions. They test their arguments in the context of Brexit.

Brexit has been a divisive issue for the major parties in the UK, and was particularly salient in the early stages of the development of the issue. In

April 2016, two months before the referendum, **research** showed that 'scores of Conservative MPs...have endorsed the Leave campaign. Other MPs have sided with the Prime Minister and the Chancellor in backing Remain.' The percentage of MPs supporting Remain was 52%, and the percentage supporting Leave was 38%. Meanwhile, Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn **declared** that the party would support the Remain campaign. However, he also stated that 'there is a diversity of opinion on Britain's membership in the country and within the PLP [parliamentary Labour party] and individuals will be free to campaign as they wish.' This lack of clarity was also reflected in the party's **statement** that it would make a 'hard-headed, patriotic case both for Britain in Europe and for change in Europe.' In contrast, the two other national parties, UKIP and the Liberal Democrats, have had a unified stance against and for continued membership in the European Union, respectively.

How did these varying levels of intra-party division over the Brexit issue affect voters' perceptions of parties' European integration positions? Did voters accurately perceive party positions, and how certain did they feel about their perceptions of these positions? We argue that, when a party's position changes over time, not with a unified voice, but with different preferences within the party, voters are unsure about which of the messages they hear is referring to the actual party position. Therefore, voters are unlikely to accurately update their perceptions and unlikely to feel certain about their perceptions in response to shifts by divided parties. On the other hand, the more clearly parties deliver their positions, the less room there is for confusion. Hence, when the party provides clear, unified messages about its policy positions, we should see voters accurately update their perceptions of party positions and also feel highly certain about their perceptions.

To test these arguments, we combined data on UK parties' European integration positions with survey data asking respondents' perceptions of

party positions and how certain they feel about their perceptions. The survey data came from the **British Election Study (BES)**, which has conducted a panel survey of 19 waves since 2014, asking the same respondents where they would locate political parties in the UK on the European integration scale. In five of these waves (waves 1, 2, 4, 6, and 7), respondents were also asked to indicate how certain they feel about their perceptions of parties' European integration positions. We used the data from these five waves to test how much respondents update their perceptions of party positions over time and how certain they feel about their perceptions as parties change their positions over the period.

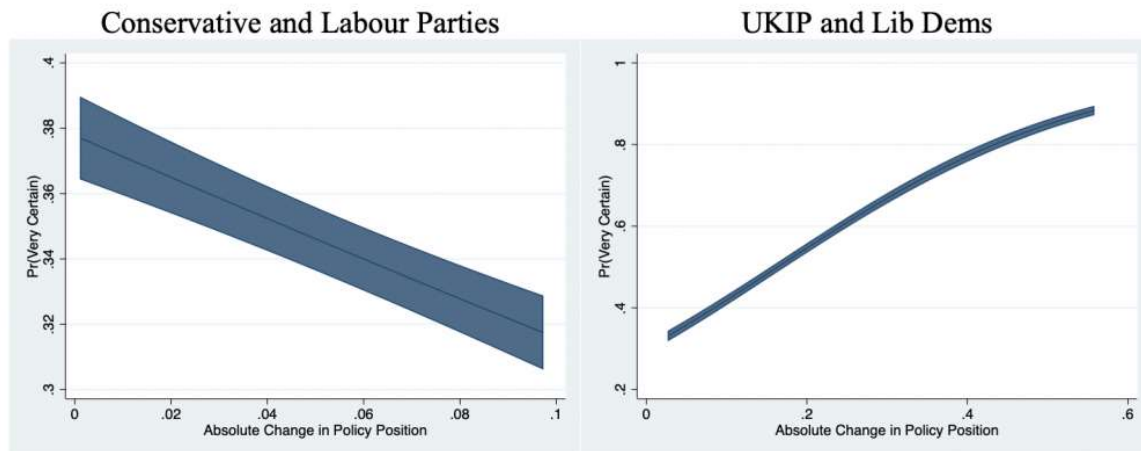
To locate parties' positions on European integration, we used newspaper data for the one-month period before each of these five waves of the BES. These data are part of a new project, called the **Comparative Campaign Dynamics** Project. To measure party issue positions, we used the two highest-circulating daily broadsheet newspapers, *The Guardian* and *The Daily Telegraph*, and coded the share of each month period's political discussions dedicated to the European integration issue. We summed the shares for pro-European integration coverage and subtracted this sum from the sum of anti-European integration coverage. The values can range from -1 to +1, where -1 would mean that all media coverage of the party's position in the one-month period was pro-EU, and +1 would mean that all coverage was anti-EU. Table 1 shows the parties' European integration positions on this scale.

Table 1: Parties' Positions on European Integration in Each Wave of the Study

	Wave 1 Feb-Mar 2014	Wave 2 May-Jun 2014	Wave 4 Mar 2015	Wave 6 May 2015	Wave 7 Apr-May 2016
Conservative Party	0.089	0.169	0.072	0.024	0.025
Labour Party	-0.045	0.031	-0.059	-0.018	-0.088
Lib Dem	-0.156	-0.25	-0.027	0	-0.091
UKIP	0.333	0.75	0.190	0.25	0.471

Our analyses support our expectations. While respondents accurately updated their perceptions of party positions for the Lib Dems and UKIP, they did not for the Conservative and Labour Parties. Moreover, people felt less certain about their perceptions of the positions of the Conservative and Labour Parties but felt more certain about their perceptions for the Lib Dems and UKIP. To illustrate, Figure 1 shows that the predicted probability that a respondent feels very certain declines as the divided parties make greater position shifts (left panel), while it increases as the united parties make greater position shifts (right panel).

Figure 1: Predicted probabilities of being very certain across the values of absolute policy change



These findings suggest that intra-party unity has consequences for not only policymaking and party success as has been argued (see [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)), but also for voter welfare. As our research shows, intra-party unity helps voters understand and feel certain about party policy positions. While our research focused on the issue of European integration, the implications are not confined to Brexit. Our arguments can apply to other salient issues, including [taxation](#), [welfare](#), [energy](#), and [international relations](#). The proper functioning of representative democracy relies on accurate perceptions of party positions by voters. If voters cast their votes based on inaccurate perceptions, they may give a mandate to parties whose positions they do not share. Uncertainty about party positions can also influence the extent to

which voters can rely on information about these positions when making political decisions. This, in turn, may have negative downstream consequences on programmatic party competition.

Note: the above draws on the authors' [article](#) in the *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties*.

About the Authors



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